

How to Start and Maintain an Oyster Garden

Step Two: Choose a Growing Strategy

Should you start in the spring or the fall?

You can begin growing your oysters in the fall (September - November) or the spring (March - May). Oysters in Virginia generally experience the greatest growth and disease exposure from June through August.

When you start your oysters will determine how many times they are exposed to disease. For example, June through early September is the time in Virginia when new infections of Dermo generally occur and existing infections intensify. By waiting until fall to start your garden you can avoid exposure to Dermo during the early stage of oyster growth and limit your oysters to a single disease exposure period (the following summer) during the culture cycle. This level of exposure to Dermo is generally not sufficient to cause mortality in hardy oyster stocks.

Over the past 15-20 years scientists have advocated a strategy whereby oyster gardeners buy “fall seed.” This strategy maximizes the number of growing seasons prior to reaching two disease exposure seasons (see Box 1).

The use of fall seed normally results in very rapid growth during the first fall season (see Box 2). Failure to achieve growth in this time period results in small oysters (less than 35 mm). Entering the winter months, oysters of this size have a reduced likelihood of reaching harvestable size prior to succumbing to disease.

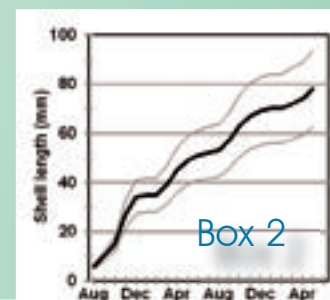
But there are alternative approaches. Spring seed, spawned as early as March, has successfully been used by many growers. While this approach provides

for fewer growing seasons prior to two disease exposure seasons (see Box 1), it does help you to avoid the risks of entering the winter with small oysters.

This strategy has worked at sites with very high growth rates, such as the high salinity environments of the Atlantic side of the Eastern Shore, and can result in growth to harvest size in 14 months or less. Further, some individuals have had success growing oysters which were spawned during May or June and placed in the field during July.

Successful use of summer seed seems to require a culture site with only modest disease exposure risk. For the oyster gardener, it is most important to ensure that the seed you purchase is disease free at the time of the purchase, and that it was produced from the best available brood stocks.

A final aspect of managing disease by timing techniques is to harvest oysters before they enter their second summer, when Dermo infections are likely to intensify, and the oysters succumb to the disease. It may be more gratifying to eat a 2½ inch oyster in April than to wait a few months for it to grow larger and lose it to disease.



Box 1

Fall Seed

1st Fall → 1st Winter → 1st Spring → 1st Summer → 2nd Fall → 2nd Winter → 2nd Spring → 2nd Summer
good growth poor growth good growth poor growth good growth poor growth good growth poor growth
disease exposure
Harvest → Harvest

Spring Seed

1st Spring → 1st Summer → 1st Fall → 1st Winter → 2nd Spring → 2nd Summer
good growth poor growth good growth poor growth good growth poor growth
disease exposure
Harvest → Harvest